

Characteristics of Internet Sexual Offenders – A Review

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Abstract

The review presented in this paper provides some descriptive findings regarding Internet Sex Offenders (ISOs) in comparison to contact sex offenders. In general, Internet Sex Offenders are found to be Caucasian, male, relatively young, highly educated, intelligent, and well-employed. ISOs also appear to be highly sexualised, in both their current lifestyle as well as childhood experiences as victims. ISOs can also be classified into several subgroups, such as child pornography offenders, who again are a heterogeneous group themselves. Professionals dealing with ISOs should be aware that they seem to share similar deficits with contact sex offenders but might differ in some important areas. This information should be kept in mind when reading their files, establishing treatment needs, and interpreting psychometric test results. To date no personality and risk measure is validated on this “new” or emerging offender category, hence any results should be interpreted with caution.

Introduction

“[The Internet] is considered to be a “paradise” for sex offenders who want to hook victims”
(Barak & King, 2000, p. 518)

The importance of the Internet in everyday life is pervasive: email communications and information transfers of all sorts (documents, photographs, news) are important to our personal and public lives. It is therefore unsurprising that the Internet is also widely used for sexual communication and information purposes. Many sexually-related questions can be answered online that may be otherwise dismissed due to their perceived embarrassing content or lack of an addressee. Also, the Internet enables persons to view and purchase sexually-related goods for personal entertainment, which some individuals might feel too uncomfortable to procure in the open. The Internet can also help users to find sexual partners, for online

communications as well as real-life; it offers opportunities to engage in cybersex and to exchange sexual material, such as explicit pictures, videos, or narratives. There are endless websites and online newsgroups subscribed to sexual education, sexual health, sexual therapies, and sexual identities which offer beneficial information for the interested user.

Many of these online sexual activities are legal and undoubtedly contribute to the sexual liberty of each individual. However, a substantial part of online sexual activities might be regarded as immoral or obscene, some to the extent that they constitute crimes. Griffiths (2000) divided sexually-related Internet crimes into two categories: (1) the display, downloading, and/or the distribution of illegal sexual material and (2) the use of the Internet to sexually procure and/or intimidate an individual in some way.

The ease by which online criminal behaviours can be committed may be explained by a disinhibition effect: the perceived anonymity and de-individuation of the Internet may trigger behaviours which reflect inner personal desires that are usually suppressed by social constraints (Barak, 2005). The lack of a direct face-to-face partner makes it easier to neglect social norms and to ignore politeness and appropriateness, hence leading to less altruistic, more selfish, and more aggressive responses when online (Demetriou & Silke, 2004; McGrath & Casey, 2002). Barak (2005) also mentions the “SIDE effect”, namely, the “Social Identity Explanation of De-individuation Effect”. According to this theory, an individual’s identity is more readily guided by group standards, which in case of the Internet are apparently fed by male domination and aggressive communication. However, in Barak’s opinion, these standards might lower the threshold but will only influence an individual that is prepared to engage in harassing activities.

A well-adapted and much-cited concept to explain the attraction of the Internet for sex offenders is Cooper’s (1998) “Triple-A-Engine” which refers to the

perceived affordability, accessibility, and anonymity of the Internet. In terms of affordability, the Internet telecommunication industries have always offered personalised Internet supply, including flat-rates that provide unrestricted Internet access to any person. In terms of accessibility, the Internet offers both the opportunity to go online as well as find the intended material, or potential victims. As Griffiths (2000) points out, society has become, more accepting of Internet usage and Internet relationships and hence offers a broader audience to the potential abuser. Also, previously rather isolated groups, such as paedophiles, can expand their influence online via newsgroups or websites, which can hardly be prevented. Lastly, in terms of perceived anonymity- which Branscomb (1995) more accurately refers to as "pseudonymity" since one's electronic information is traceable back to the source- it increases one's willingness to disclose personal information about one's sex life at a much faster pace, and to sexually experiment more openly (Branwyn, 1993). Besides that, online anonymity allows an offender to engage in criminal behaviour with a relatively low risk of detection (McGrath & Casey, 2002).

In addition to the "Triple-A-Engine", a further "A" factor that encourages illegal behaviour is that of "antisocial group norms" favourable of criminal behaviour; it is commonly accepted to illegally download (and share) movies, music, or pirated software. Demetriou and Silke (2003) showed that the mere presence of illegal material encourages people to engage in unlawful actions. In their comprehensive online study, they created a website that provided visitors with fake-links to hacked games, pirated software, and stolen passwords. Even though less than 8% of their sample were explicitly looking for illegal material, most users attempted to download hacked games (81%), pirated software (41%), and stolen passwords (37%). This broad acceptance of breaking laws in the online community further contributes to the occurrence of online sex offending.

Sexual harassment might cause significant harm to its victims and limit their sense of freedom and security when using the Internet. Most identified victims of online sexual harassment are women (Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, & Ritter, 2002; Barak, 2005). These figures might change given that a substantial part of online sex offending refers to children and adolescents and has received increasing research attention over the last years (for example, see Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008).

There are several ways in which child sex offenders and paedophilesⁱ can utilise the Internet for their purposes:

- To distribute child sexual images for personal and/or commercial reasons

- To establish and engage in contact to other individuals with a sexual interest in children

- To engage in inappropriate online sexual communication with children

- To harass children online with threats or sexually explicit material

- To locate children as potential victims for contact abuse

- To promote sexual tourism and/or child trafficking

With deployment of the Internet, offenders have experienced a significant increase in their opportunities for victim grooming. The Internet offers access to and information about potential victims who can easily be engaged with concurrently. Hence, it is now possible for an offender to monitor several victims at the same time at different stages of the grooming process. Given the possibilities to misrepresent one's age, gender, and physical looks when online, offenders encounter new possibilities to make victims more inclined to contact manipulative offenders. Also, as Aftab (2000) points out, online offenders invest much more time in grooming than their real-life counterparts, which is likely a consequence of their perceived lower personal risk.

Considering these aspects, it is hardly surprising that Webb, Craissati, and Keen (2007) have described a "new wave of arrests, charges, and convictions" (p. 449) of sex offenders has followed the introduction of the Internet. Police forces, courts, and correctional services consequently have to deal with a "new" category of sex offenders. Despite the novelty of that topic, research over the last two decades has successively paid more attention to Internet Sex Offenders. As Middleton, Beech, and Mandelville-Norden (2004) suggested, Internet sex offending is a unique manifestation of the general spectrum of sex offending behaviour but contains a very heterogeneous group within itself. As a result, many questions have arisen regarding management and risk of these offenders. Can conventional assessment methods and treatment approaches successfully be applied to these individuals, or do they differ from their contact offender counterparts? An examination of the characteristics of this "new" offender group shall help to get these much-needed answers.

Method

The following article is a critical review of contemporary research findings on ISOs in comparison to contact sex offenders. Table 1 shows the studies that were included; these were retrieved as part of a broader literature search on Internet sexual offending that was undertaken by the first author in August to December 2008. Main sources of information were professional journals

Table 1. Studies included in review

Alexy, E. M., Burgess, A. W., & Baker, T. (2005). Internet offenders: Traders, travellers, and combination trader-travellers. <i>Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20</i> (7), 804-812.
Bates, A. & Metcalf, C. (2007). A psychometric comparison of Internet and non-Internet sex offenders from a community treatment sample. <i>Journal of Social Aggression, 13</i> (1), 11-20.
Carr, A. (2004). Internet traders of child pornography and other censorship offenders in New Zealand. Wellington, NZ: Department of Internal Affairs. Retrieved September 22, 2008, from http://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/Resource-material-Our-Research-and-Reports-Internet-Traders-of-Child-Pornography-and-other-Censorship-Offenders-in-New-Zealand?OpenDocument
Frei, A., Erenen, N., Dittman, V., & Graf, M. (2005). Paedophilia on the internet. A study of 33 convicted offenders in the Canton of Lucerne. <i>Swiss Medical Weekly, 135</i> , 488-494.
Howitt, D. & Sheldon, K. (2007). The role of cognitive distortions in paedophilic offending: Internet and contact offenders compared. <i>Psychology, Crime and Law, 13</i> (5), 469-486.
Laulik, S., Allam, J., & Sheridan, L. (2007). An investigation into maladaptive personality functioning in Internet sex offenders. <i>Psychology, Crime and Law, 13</i> (5), 523 – 535.
Malesky, L. A. (2007). Predatory online behaviour: Modus operandi of convicted sex offenders in identifying potential victims and contacting minors over the Internet. <i>Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 16</i> (2), 23-32.
McLaughlin, J. F. (2000). Cyber child sex offender typology. <i>Knight Stick: Publication of the New Hampshire Police Association, 51</i> , 39-42. Retrieved October 6, 2008, from http://www.ci.keene.nh.us/police/Typology.html
Middleton, D., Beech, A., & Mandeville-Norden, R. (2004, May). What sort of person could do that? Psychological profiles of Internet pornography users. Paper presented at 5 th COPINE Conference, Cork, Ireland.
Middleton, D., Elliott, I. A., Mandeville-Norden, R., & Beech, A. R. (2006). An investigation into the applicability of the Ward and Siegert Pathways Model of child sexual abuse on Internet offenders. <i>Psychology, Crime and Law, 12</i> (6), 589-603.
Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., & Wolak, J. (2005). The Internet and family and acquaintance sexual abuse. <i>Child Maltreatment, 10</i> (1), 49-60.
Sample, L. L. & Bray, T. M. (2006). Are sex offenders different? An examination of rearrest patterns. <i>Criminal Justice Policy Review, 17</i> (1), 83-102.
Seto, M. C. & Eke, A. W. (2005). The criminal histories and later offending of child pornography offenders. <i>Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 17</i> (2), 201-210.
Sheldon, K. & Howitt, D. (2007). <i>Sex offenders and the Internet</i> . Chichester, UK: West Sussex.
Sullivan, C. (2007). Internet traders of child pornography: Profiling research – update. Wellington, NZ: Department of Internal Affairs. Retrieved October 14, 2008, from http://www.dia.govt.nz/Pubforms.nsf/URL/Profilingupdate3.pdf/\$file/Profilingupdate3.pdf .
Walsh, W. A. & Wolak, J. (2005). Nonforcible Internet-related sex crimes with adolescent victims: prosecution issues and outcomes. <i>Child Maltreatment, 10</i> (3), 260-271.
Webb, L., Craissati, J., & Keen, S. (2007). Characteristics of Internet child pornography offenders: A comparison with child molesters. <i>Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 19</i> , 449-465.

and book publications in psychology, psychiatry, and law.

Utilising a qualitative approach, studies were analysed according to emerging categories. Two studies directly compared ISOs and contact sex offenders; for the categories that examined characteristics of ISOs only, the groups of contact offenders were excluded from the analysis. Some samples consist of ISOs in general while others only refer to child pornography offending; as child pornography offenders are likely to be a distinct subgroup of ISOs, their data will be considered separately when feasible.

Data gathering considerably differed between studies; some outcomes were based on interviews while others referred to file information only. Some subjects were drawn from filed arrest data, while others volunteered from treatment centres, which as a result may lead to varying depth and biased information in the presented data.

There are also some limitations regarding publication selection: the data analysis by Alexy, Burgess, and Baker (2005) was also based on a review but the included references are not further specified. Even though their sources are reportedly drawn from newspapers, magazines, government releases, and online news web pages (sources that were not approached for the current analysis), overlapping studies are possible. Also, the reports by Carr (2004) and Sullivan (2007) refer to records of the Censorship Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Hence, only the latest report by Sullivan (2007) was included into the demographic tabulation. Finally, Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2005) and Walsh and Wolak (2005) have both drawn their samples from the large data pool collected through the National Juvenile Online Victimization study; again, the samples might show overlaps in their composition.

These methodological limitations are accepted, given that the purpose of this study is an overview of existing material rather than a detailed meta-analysis. The following discussion will summarise what is known about ISO variables - demographic, psychosocial, and offence-related. For the purposes of this article, an ISO is defined as an individual who used the Internet in some way to commit a sexual crime, for example by contacting potential victims for offline sexual offenses, or by engaging in online sexual chat with a minor. Child pornography offenders are examined separately when indicated as an independent sample.

Demographic variables

The demographic composition of each study is depicted in Table 2. For each category, the study with the most information was used to define the number of sub-categories. As mentioned above, not all studies included in the review were demographically analysed. There

were some difficulties with filling each gap in the table, as publications considerably differ in the extent of offender descriptions. Some studies reported raw data while others offered percentage scores or summarised over several categories. Also, age was often described in incompatible intervals. Additionally, content-related questions occurred, for example with broad labels such as “professional”. In these cases, data were subject to interpretation by the authors. At a possible expense of information loss, it was decided to use percentage rates to facilitate between-group comparisons.

Gender

The average percentage rate of male gender is 99.2%, which shows a clear dominance of male ISOs. Five of the studies drew their subjects from environments where a gender bias can be assumed, such as prison sites; this refers to Bates and Metcalf (2007), Howitt and Sheldon (2007), Laulik, Allam, and Sheridan (2007), Malesky (2007), and Webb et al. (2007). After exclusion of these samples, the average percentage rate of male gender did reduce, but the remaining 98.7% still show a clear majority of male offenders. Outcomes did not differ for online child pornography offenders; in general, 99.1% of image offenders were male, 98.4% remained after exclusion of the assumingly gender-biased studies.

Not much is known about female online offenders. According to Taylor and Quayle (2003), female abusers are often characterised by a history of own victimisation, life problems, and mental health problems. In Carr’s (2004) analysis of New Zealand’s child pornography offenders, the sole female offender differed from her male counterparts as she distributed abusive images merely for financial gains instead of sexual pleasure.

Age

Studies differed in their data presentation of age. In order to obtain equivalent data, mean age of each sub-sample was determined. As some of the studies presented age in categories, average age was estimated by assuming fixed length for the outer intervals. Again, this may lead to information loss but ensures between-group comparisons. Bates and Metcalf (2007) had no age information in their offender description, and hence were excluded from the age analysis.

Overall, ISOs presented an average age of 35.0 years; when only child pornography offenders were considered, mean age rose slightly to 35.7 years. Webb et al. (2007) compared their sample of online child pornography offenders with a sample of contact child molesters, and found that ISOs were significantly younger than their contact counterparts ($t=3.74$, $p<0.0005$). On the other hand, Sheldon and Howitt

(2007) reported no age difference between their samples of ISOs, contact, and mixed (both Internet and contact sexual crimes) offenders. It seems reasonable to assume an age gap between Internet and contact offenders, given the higher computer literacy in younger generations. However, the indication of a possible age difference needs to be empirically confirmed.

Ethnicity

All publications stem from nations with a majority of Caucasian offenders, which is expected to reflect in ethnicity information. Only seven studies had included information on the ethnicity of the offenders; 93% of all offenders were Caucasians. The three studies on child pornography offenders featured 91.7% of offenders with European origins. Overall, a clear majority of white offenders becomes apparent.

This is an interesting aspect for at least two reasons. Despite their majority in the population, in New Zealand Caucasians are generally underrepresented in prisons, especially with regards to sex offences. This was also observed in Webb et al.’s (2007) comparison study, where ISOs were significantly more likely to be white than contact child sex offenders ($X^2=15.30$, $df=2$, $p<0.0005$). On the other hand, as white ethnicity continues to be related to higher education and higher income, available computer and Internet access as well as computer literacy could be mediating variables.

Education and employment

These were the most difficult categories to analyse as not many studies had included relevant information and, if they had, displayed considerable differences in their groupings. Although some of the studies might overlap (for example, “self-employed” can include “professionals”), it was decided to keep as much information as possible. To establish a uniform evaluation form, the categories “part-time” and “full-time” in the Mitchell et al. (2005) study was equally divided between “self-employed” and “employee”.

Only four studies offered information on educational level of ISOs. According to Howitt and Sheldon (2007), their subjects had an average education of 18.8 years which indicates some college and university education for a considerable amount of their sample. All of their subjects were online child pornography offenders. The remaining three studies refer to ISOs in general and report 34.7% of subjects with a college education, while 14.3% have graduated and at least partly continued at university level.

Employment data are vague and average percentage rates vary in the number of contributing studies and so shall be considered with caution. Overall, the majority of ISOs are either “professional” (26.7%) or

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Table 2: Demographic variables of ISOs.

	Alexy et al. (2005) (sample 1)	Alexy et al. (2005) (sample 2+3)	Bates & Metcalf (2007)	Frei et al. (2005)	Howitt & Sheldon (2007)	Laulik et al. (2007)	Malesky (2007)	McLaughlin (2000)	Middleton et al. (2005)	Middlet on et al. (2006)	Mitchell et al. (2005)	Sullivan (2007)	Walsh & Wolak (2005)	Webb et al. (2007)	average
n	133	92	37	33	16	30	31	201	43	72	126	215	77	90	Σ=1196
gender															
<i>male</i>	94.7%	95.6%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%	99.2%
<i>female</i>	5.3%	4.4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0.8%
age															
<20	3%	0%	-	-	-	-	-	10.5%	-	-	(used income-parable categories)	15%	0%	-	-
20-29	21.8%	17%	-	-	-	-	-	25%	-	-		31%	30%	-	-
30-39	34.6%	37%	-	-	-	-	-	23.5%	-	-		27.9%	34%	-	-
40-49	16.5%	21.9%	-	-	-	-	-	26%	-	-		13.5%	21%	-	-
50-59	11.3%	12.3%	-	-	-	-	-	0%	-	-		9.03%	8%	-	-
>59	2.3%	1%	-	-	-	-	-	2.5%	-	-		1.4%	8%	-	-
<i>M</i>	33.1y	34.5y	-	39.8y	46.5y	40.7y	36.6y	29.4y	42.1y	43.2y	36.2y	31.7y	38.5y	38.0y	35.0y
Ethnicity															
<i>Caucasian</i>	-	-	-	100%	-	100%	94%	-	100%	-	95%	75%	87%	-	93%
<i>other</i>	-	-	-	0%	-	0%	6%	-	0%	-	5%	25%	13%	-	7%
Education															
<i>M</i>	-	-	-	-	18.8y	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.8y
<i>college</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	56%	-	-	-	30%	-	18%	-	34.7%
<i>graduate</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	7%	-	-	-	5%	-	31%	-	14.3%
Employment															
<i>Professional</i>	39.1%	31.0%	-	33%	-	-	-	19%	11.16%	-	-	-	-	-	26.7%
<i>Labourer</i>	8.3%	3.2%	-	12%	-	-	-	22%	11.62%	-	-	-	-	-	11.4%
<i>Unemployed/ Beneficiary</i>	5.3%	4.5%	-	3%	-	-	-	1%	22.32%	-	9%	-	-	-	7.5%
<i>Military</i>	4.5%	1%	-	-	-	-	-	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.2%
<i>Student</i>	6.0%	1%	-	-	-	-	-	22%	23%	-	5%	-	-	-	11.4%
<i>Clergy</i>	0.8%	3.4%	-	-	-	-	-	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.7%
<i>Self-employed</i>	-	-	-	12%	-	-	-	-	1.86%	-	42%	-	-	-	18.6%
<i>employee</i>	-	-	-	39%	-	-	-	-	19.53%	-	42%	-	-	-	33.5%
<i>retired</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11%	0.46%	-	5%	-	-	-	5.5%
<i>Computer-related</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13%	17%	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Access to children</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4%	-	-	-	30%	-	-	-
Relationship status															
<i>single</i>	-	-	-	33% (46.5%)	31%	-	-	87.5%	40%	-	55% (58%)	-	63%	-	54.33%
<i>partner</i>	-	-	-	27%	-	-	-	-	-	-	6%	-	-	-	-
<i>married</i>	-	-	-	27% (40.5%)	69%	-	-	13.5%	60%	-	35% (38%)	-	35%	-	42.7%

Samples consisting of online child pornography offenders only are highlighted in grey. Table does not include missing data.

“employee” (33.5%), followed by “self-employed” (18.6%), labourer (11.4%) and students (11.4%). In contrast, 7.5% of offenders were either unemployed or beneficiaries, and 5.5% retired. Given the hazy nature of these data, a further distinction for child pornography offenders was not undertaken.

Only three studies offered more specific information on employment of their subjects. Employment details contain important information as high-risk groups can be identified. For example, computer experts were found in 13% of the McLaughlin (2000) sample and 17% of the Middleton et al. (2004) sample. Employment positions that enabled contact with children and/or adolescents were identified in 4% of the McLaughlin (2000) sample and 30% in the Sullivan (2007) sample. Both subgroups of ISOs would need employment-related probation restrictions.

Overall, most ISOs seem to be in respectable social positions. However, their job and their higher income might indirectly be related to available finances (to spend on equipment and Internet access), work-related computer and Internet access, and computer skills. Higher education and employment opportunities differentiate this group of Internet offenders from their contact counterparts. ISOs are also more likely to be employed than sex offenders without Internet offences (Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, & Sherry, 2002). Sheldon and Howitt (2007) and Burke et al. suggested these differences to be based on a higher IQ on part of the ISOs; at least computer skills require a higher literacy level.

Relationship status

Only five studies offered information on relationship status of the offenders. Given that most studies mainly differentiated between “single” and “married”, it was unclear how to label those with a romantic partnership. Hence, in studies that provided percentage rates for “partner”, those figures were equally divided between the two remaining categories (see in brackets, Table 2).

The resulting rates show that 42.7% of ISOs are married/in a partnership while 54.33% of ISOs are single. Since only one study referred to child pornography offenders, it was desisted from a separate analysis. Even though Webb et al. (2007) offered no detailed classification information, their study showed that online child pornography offenders had significantly less live-in relationships than the sample of contact sex offenders ($X^2=7.61$, $df=1$, $p<0.01$).

Two interesting aspects resulted from the more detailed analysis in Sheldon and Howitt (2007). Even though nearly 70% of all three groups of offenders (ISO, contact, mixed) were in a sexual relationship with an adult at the time of their offending, over half of them were also promiscuous and/or visited sex workers (44%

ISOs, 40% mixed, 48% contact offenders), so the presence of a relationship cannot necessarily be used as indication of the ability to build stable social bonds. Furthermore, while only 12% of contact sex offenders and 30% of mixed offenders were able to establish secure attachments with adults, 50% of ISOs reported secure attachment style to adults. Hence, a more distinguishing aspect could be a focus on the *meaning of adult relationships* for the individual offender. An examination of related psychosocial variables, such as social isolation or poor social skills, will offer more information on the social skills and needs of ISOs.

Summary

The research at that point describes ISOs as typically white, male, and with a mean age between 30 and 40 years. ISOs appear to have higher education and employment than contact-only sex offenders, which may be mediated by the higher computer literacy and Internet access, or a higher IQ, of these populations. The relationship status of ISOs seems not to differ from contact sex offenders but they seem more likely to build stable adult social bonds. No differentiating information was found for the group of child pornography offenders in particular; there is some indication that ISOs might have less, or at least less stable, intimate relationships than other sex offender types.

Psychosocial variables

Psychosocial variables refer to personality characteristics of a person; it is assumed that sex offenders have a certain psychological “set-up” that supports the choice of a criminal pathway, such as problems with general and sexual self-regulation or presence of sexually deviant cognitions (Hanson, 2000). These variables form dynamic risk factors, which are important components in the assessment and treatment of sex offenders (Allan, Grace, Rutherford, & Hudson, 2007). Knowledge of the idiosyncratic psychosocial variables of ISOs is essential to be able to provide safe clinical practice in their assessment and treatment.

Childhood experiences

Webb and her colleagues (2007) found that both Internet and contact sex offenders had experienced difficulties in their childhood but the latter group experienced significantly more physical abuse than the former ($X^2=9.93$, $df=1$, $p<0.005$). This was confirmed by Sheldon and Howitt (2007) who found that contact offenders had experienced higher rates of physical (72% vs. 60% mixed and 44% ISOs) and sexual abuse (56% vs. 50% mixed offenders and 20% ISOs). Interestingly, in their sample, ISOs had the highest likelihood of growing up with lack of at least one significant adult (absence of caregivers: 37% ISOs,

28% contact, 40% mixed; death of significant person: 37% ISOs, 16% contact, 10% mixed). Nevertheless, all three samples had the same occurrence of two or more emotional and behavioural problems during childhood (37-40%).

All three offender subgroups experienced a highly sexualised childhood. Interestingly, Internet offenders reported the highest rate of consensual peer sex play, especially before age 12 years, while contact sex offenders had the lowest rates.

Psychological variables

Bates and Metcalf (2007) compared ISOs and contact sex offenders on several psychometric tests. ISOs had greater self-esteem, felt less affected by external control, had lower rates of personal distress, and had lower scores on "self-deception" scales but scored higher on emotional loneliness, under-assertiveness, and impression management. Sheldon and Howitt (2007) found self-indicated social intimacy problems for more than half of their ISO sample; only 36% of contact offenders but 70% of mixed offenders reported similar problems. In contrast to the study by Bates and Metcalf (2007), all three offender groups had equal self esteem issues. Elevated rates of social desirability were also found in the study by Webb et al. (2007) and Middleton et al. (2004). However, the high scores on impression management and social desirability lower the informative value of all psychometric testing as they might influence test results in a socially more acceptable direction.

Sheldon and Howitt (2007) also examined the coping behaviour of sex offenders. All three subgroups had similar forms of coping behaviours, but ISOs had less emotion-focused stress-responses.

Mental health issues

Webb et al. (2007) found that their sample of child pornography offenders had had significantly more contact with mental health services than their contact counterparts. However, Sheldon and Howitt (2007) found an enhanced occurrence of mental health problems mainly for their contact sex offender samples (36% vs. 19% ISOs and 20% mixed). All of their subsamples displayed higher scores on schizophrenia, avoidance, anxiety, and dependency than is expected in the normal population, but outcomes did not differ between groups. Similar results were found by Laulik et al. (2007) whose group of ISOs had abnormally high scores on depression, schizophrenia, borderline, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and stress but lower rates on mania, aggression, dominance, and warmth. There was a moderate correlation between amount of time spent online and evidence of psychological problems.

Substance abuse

While about half of the mixed and the contact offender subjects in Sheldon and Howitt's (2007) sample reported a history of substance abuse, this was found in only a quarter of ISOs. No other study reported information on substance abuse on part of the offender.

Psychopathy

Only two studies included information on psychopathy. In Webb et al.'s (2007) study, online child pornography obtained significantly lower scores on the Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version than contact sex offenders. In Laulik et al. (2007), psychopathy was indirectly assessed via antisocial behaviours; ISOs scored higher than the normal population. More research is needed to determine whether psychopathic offenders might constitute a critical subgroup of ISOs.

Paraphilias

Only one study included information on sexual paraphilias of their sample. In a study by Frei, Erenay, Dittman, and Graf (2007) 6% of ISOs were assessed with voyeurism and 3% with paedophilia. The rate of paedophilia amongst child pornography offenders would offer valuable information on criminal motivation and treatment needs of this offender group. In general, ISOs would seem to be a highly sexualised population. This view is confirmed by the early sex play and promiscuous adult behavior in Sheldon and Howitt's (2007) sample. Additionally, more than half of the ISOs and mixed offenders described sex as a means to escape their problems while this was agreed to by only 32% of contact offenders.

Summary

Information on psychosocial variables of ISOs is rather sparse. It appears that ISOs typically have experienced less physical and sexual abuse than contact sex offenders although they report a highly sexualised childhood, often characterised by early consensual peer sex play. The psychological variables of ISOs do not seem to differ from contact sex offenders but they are found to have higher scores on impression management and social desirability, and perhaps higher scores on social intimacy problems. They could also be less likely to have a history of substance abuse but this information is based on only one study and needs further examination. Not many studies reported outcomes for child pornography offenders in particular; Webb et al. (2007) reported higher mental health rates and lower psychopathy scores than for contact sex offenders.

Offence related variables

Offence-related variables refer in this context to the characteristics of a person's sexual crime, such as age

and gender of victims, or closeness to the victim. These factors have been found to have a relationship with sexual reoffending for contact sex offenders (for example, see Hanson, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2007), and hence are commonly tested in conventional actuarial risk measures, such as the STATIC-99 (Hanson & Thornton, 1999).

Prior criminal record

The criminal history of the examined subjects was difficult to define, given the different approaches in each study. For instance, some studies counted arrest data only while others relied on self-report. Only five studies offered comparable data. As studies differed in their crime taxonomy (e.g., “general criminal offences”, “violent offences”, “sexual offences”), violent and non-violent nonsexual offences could not be differentiated. Sexual offences range from contact offences (such as rape) as well as non-contact offences (for instance, exhibitionism). Censorship offences include all kinds of pornography offences as well as other online censorship violations; in studies of child pornography offenders, this usually refers to prior child pornography offences. Resulting percentage rates are depicted in Table 3. As a person could have several previous offences, reported percentage rates might exceed 100%.

Table 3: Offence rates of prior criminal record of ISOs

	N	None	non-sexual	censorship offence	sexual (real world)
Frei et al. (2005)	33	69%	18%	12%	0%
Laulik et al. (2007)	30	77%	13.2%	6.7%	6.7%
McLaughlin (2000)	200	-	-	-	12%
Seto & Eke (2005)	201	54%	75%	15%	41%
Walsh & Wolak (2005)	77	-	27%	0%	9%
Average	Σ=541	66.7%	33.3%	8.4%	13.7%

Generally, it seems that two thirds (66.7%) of ISOs have not had any prior offences. The most frequent offence type in ISOs with a criminal record is non-sexual (33.3%), followed by sexual offending (13.7%), and only 8.4% had prior censorship offences. However, one should be cautious as policing of censorship offences has only become more sophisticated in the last years so prior Internet offences are more likely to have been undetected.

The overall impression of fewer criminal records within the Internet offender subgroup was also confirmed by Webb et al. (2007) who found significantly less prior sexual convictions in their sample of child pornography offenders than with contact child sex offenders. A similar result was offered

by Howitt and Sheldon (2007), whose sample of Internet-only and Internet-contact sex offenders had a considerably lower average of previous convictions (1.0 resp. 0.7) than contact-only sex offenders (7.4); the authors did not specify offence types. Nevertheless, as Carr (2004) pointed out, ISOs still have higher rates of sexual offences than the general population.

One topic of concern is the report rate of sexual offenses. In their study on 155 treated child pornography offenders, Burke and Hernandez (2009) found that the number of offenders reporting a history of contact child molestation increased from 26% pre-treatment to 85% after treatment. Many reported their offenses had occurred prior to their child pornography consumption. Even though this study was challenged by Wollert (2008) as “researcher demand effect”, a similar increase in reported contact crimes was also found by Hernandez (2000).

Material characteristics

There are some interesting observations regarding the objectionable material found with ISOs. Most of the 33 offenders in Frei et al.’s (2007) study possessed either paedophilic material (42%) or paedophilic material combined with sadomasochistic material and/or sodomy (18%), which, using the COPINE scale (Taylor, Holland, & Quayle, 2001), placed the majority of material found on Levels 9 (gross assault, 45%) and 10 (sadistic/bestiality, 27%). In Sullivan (2007), most child pornographic material was confined to child abuse (51%), while 9% additionally collected bestiality material, 8% had coprophilic elements in their collection, and another 7% had depictions of extreme violence and torture in combination with the above material. Similar results were reported by Carr (2004), who describes that the majority of images found with New Zealand offenders were abuse-only (57.55%), followed by additional coprophilic (35.38%), or bestiality material (29.84%). Her detailed analysis revealed that pictures with extreme content are normally part of a large and well-organised collection, which could be an indication for more enduring and persistent collection and trading activities. This is further confirmed by her finding that the selection of urination, defecation, and bestiality material in combination with either violent or nudity material seems to define higher-risk offenders.

Triggers for offending

Sheldon and Howitt (2007) asked their samples about self-identified triggers for their offensive behaviours. The most-reported trigger, interpersonal problems, was named by far less ISOs (56%) than other offender types (76% contact, 70% mixed). Instead, more ISOs referred to health issues as a reason for offending using the Internet (50% vs. 40% contact and 40% mixed) or work

problems (44% vs. 12% contact and 50% mixed). ISOs were more likely to attribute their behaviour to self-esteem issues (19% vs. 8% contact and 10% mixed) and less likely to act out of sexual frustration (13% vs. 32% contact and 40% mixed). Hence, it appears that many ISOs have an idiosyncratic offence motivation.

Fantasies

Sheldon and Howitt (2007) examined the role of fantasies in the offending process. All three offender subsamples (Internet-only, contact, and mixed offenders) most frequently fantasised about adult females, while child-related thoughts were less common, and the least likely were even more deviant forms. Interestingly, the gender with whom early consensual peer sex play was experienced defined the gender that was later fantasised about. Also, contact-offenders reported more confrontational/non-contact fantasies, such as observing a woman undressing. Hence, presence of a victim could be an important differentiation between fantasies in offline and online offenders.

Cognitions supportive of offending

In their comparison study of Internet and contact sex offenders, Bates and Metcalf (2007) found generally less cognitive distortions with child pornography offenders than with contact child molesters; although ISOs were more likely to have lower emotional congruence towards children and to have less victim empathy, both which underlines their sexual objectification of children. This was confirmed in the study by Howitt and Sheldon (2007) who found that significantly more subjects of their sample of ISOs regarded children as sexual objects than contact sex offenders, and were less likely to see the sexual offence as anger-motivated. One explanation might be that online offenders are not exposed to the negative reaction of their victim that contact offenders were most likely confronted with during their offence. Additionally, it is possible for ISOs to make reality fit their fantasy; some offenders would not collect material if the victim appeared unhappy (Taylor, 2001). A common cognition for both ISOs and contact sexual offenders is that the “world is a dangerous place” and that their behaviour is uncontrollable (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007).

From all offender subsamples in Howitt and Sheldon (2007), ISOs had the most distortions in their thinking, which suggests a strong link between cognitive distortions and non-contact offending. An ISO may have a sequence of self-supporting distortions – for example, “looking at child porn is o.k. because I’m not actually hurting anyone myself – and in fact, these kids look happy – they enjoyed having sex on camera – after all, they are well-paid”. Interestingly, while all ISOs

scored higher on the sexual objectification of children, only those with a previous criminal record had more justification distortions. Hence, it appears that specific knowledge about online offenders’ cognitions is a valuable tool to define differences to contact sex offenders, which needs to be implemented in treatment; for example, higher agreement with “justification” distortions might suggest a higher risk for contact offending. Some researchers suggest that distorted cognitions might be subject to change as the offender progresses through the offending stages (Carr, 2006; Quayle & Taylor, 2003). For example, Quayle and Taylor (2001) report the case of a 33 year old ISO who while he progressed from child pornography viewing to engaging with victims online, changed his behaviour and language accordingly, indicating a shift in his cognitive processes.

Pathway model

Ward and Siegert (2002) developed the “Pathway Model” that explains four different pathways leading to sexual offending: (1) intimacy and social skill deficits, (2) deviant sexual scripts, (3) emotional dysregulation, (4) cognitive distortions, and (5) mixed offences. The model is well-validated on contact sex offenders. Middleton et al. (2004) examined its applicability on 43 ISOs, of whom 60% could easily be classified into one of the pathways: 38% displayed intimacy deficits; 16% distorted sexual scripts; 35% emotional dysregulation; 4% antisocial cognitions; and 8% had multiple pathways. Similar results were found a year later, where the sample was extended to 72 ISOs (Middleton, Elliott, Mandelville-Norden, & Beech, 2006). Again, 40% could not be accommodated into a pathway. The remaining 60% had mainly intimacy deficits (35%) and emotional dysregulation (33%), followed by distorted sexual scripts (5%), antisocial cognitions (2%), and multiple pathways (2%). It seems that the main pathways for Internet offenders are Pathway 1: intimacy deficits, and Pathway 3: emotional dysregulation. It should be kept in mind though, that 40% of ISOs could not be accommodated into the taxonomy, which suggests the existence of one or more “Internet-only” pathways. Antisocial cognitions and distorted sexual scripts may be a pre-condition for the selection of gross objectionable material. If a relationship were to be found, this might assist in defining a high-risk subgroup of ISOs.

Summary

Considering offence-related variables, ISOs overall appear to have less criminal records than contact sex offenders. ISOs also seem to have idiosyncratic offending motives, mostly related to work and self-esteem issues. A particular risk consideration is the material collection found with each offender. ISOs

appear to fantasise more than contact sex offenders, and their fantasising might differ from other sex offenders, for example they have less confrontational fantasies with a victim. With regards to offence-supportive attitudes, ISOs are more likely to agree to sex objectification of children. Not much information is available on child pornography offenders only; one study reported a lower occurrence of cognitive distortions in their sample of sexual abuse image offenders in comparison to contact child sex offenders.

Conclusion

Given the increase of Internet-related sex crimes, police forces, courts, and correctional services consequently have to deal with a group of sex offenders who and whose crimes might substantially differ from a conventional sex offender profile. However, not much is known about idiosyncratic characteristics of this “new” offender group, least of all conceptualised in specific risk assessment or treatment approaches for ISOs.

This review aims to consolidate currently available research outcomes on characteristics of ISOs and their differences to contact sex offenders. As stated, some of the findings refer to the whole group of ISOs, and thus might not be specific for a child pornography offender. In general, ISOs are found to be male and of Caucasian origin. They might be slightly younger than contact sex offenders, and have higher education and greater employment opportunities. Given that ISOs are also more inclined to fantasy and higher impression management, some researchers suggested a higher IQ for this group. ISOs are found to be highly sexualised, in both their current lifestyle as well as childhood experiences. Even though they share similar cognitive distortions with their contact counterparts, ISOs are more likely to report sexual objectification of children. Finally, ISOs with a prior criminal record, elevated psychopathy scores and/or paedophilia might define specific subgroups within this group.

There are some limitations, mainly the methodological shortcomings pointed out throughout the text as well as the low number of studies included. Some of the findings were only based on one study, and all discussed aspects need further empirical validation. Nevertheless, the aim of the review was to provide a concise overview on the existing research outcomes on ISOs.

In general, it should be kept in mind that ISOs share more similarities than differences with contact sex offenders, but might differ in a few important areas. It is not safe clinical practice to transfer risk assessment and treatment approaches developed for contact sex offenders onto online sex offenders. To this point, no currently used risk measure has been validated on ISOs, and even though their usage might be required for

jurisdictional or probational reasons, their results have to be interpreted with caution. As long as no empirically validated clinical tools are available, the following guidelines when dealing with ISOs should be considered:

- ISOs seem to be highly educated, display high computer skills, and have high scores on impression management. Practitioners need to adjust their interview methods and need to be aware of the transparency of some of the used clinical tools.

- Computer experts will be technologically skilled on a level that is difficult to match by a layperson, hence professional consultation and training in computer and Internet-related matters might be needed.

- Management of opportunity factors in the community can be difficult. While victim access should always be minimised, a person’s employment will most likely involve computer and Internet access, which needs to be controlled. Special security software can be installed but, again, should be matched to the offender’s level of computer literacy. Management of computer access needs to be integrated in parole conditions.

- For child pornography offenders, their collection of deviant material will contain important information on sexual preferences, and will also disclose which locations were used to access material. This again might reveal important information, such as contact to other offenders, and membership or activity in objectionable newsgroups.

In addition, there are some differences to contact sex offenders that are yet to be empirically validated but might be worth exploring: The relationship style of ISOs seems to be different from other sex offenders; ISOs are more likely to be sexually promiscuous and also seem more apt to develop stable social bonds with adults. It would be interesting to know if the higher rate of married individuals amongst contact offenders is related to the (potential) availability of victims (e.g., wife, own children, children’s friends and children of family friends). If so, the offences of married ISOs might differ from those of unmarried ISOs. Additionally, ISOs seem to have a less emotion-focused profile, such as a lower rate of anger-motivated offences and emotional coping responses. While this might only reflect a difference in the nature of their crimes, it can also express a general difference in their psychological profiles. Thirdly, an association was found between time spent online and poor mental health; these findings can be interpreted in relation to the controversially discussed “Internet addiction”, hence these symptoms might be worth investigation (Hecht Orzack, Voluse, Wolf, & Hennen, 2006). It also appears that ISOs have specific offence-supportive cognitive distortions that are not fully captured in conventional measures of sex offenders’ cognitive distortions (more information can be found in Howitt

and Sheldon, 2007). Lastly, it should be kept in mind that ISOs can be classified into several subgroups, such as child pornography offenders, who again are a heterogeneous group themselves, with distinct profiles.

In the future, it is predicted that ISOs will become a substantial part of the dealings of police forces, courts, and correctional services. It is therefore necessary to understand their idiosyncratic presentation - to help the offender to desist from offending and to maintain the safety of society.

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- ⁱ This is an important distinction: A paedophile is defined as any individual with a preferential sexual interest in minors. However, paedophilia is regarded as a paraphilia but does not constitute a crime in itself unless acted on. On the other hand, a child sexual offender is described as any individual who has committed a sexual crime towards a child, regardless of sexual orientation.